The Prairie Home Companion Approach to Beginning and Ending a Manuscript

The beginning of a manuscript often determines whether a reader will stay engaged in reading the whole thing. Some readers skip to the conclusion to help determine whether a manuscript (in the form of an article) is worth reading. Thus, the ending is equally important. The “in between” part is often driven by the standards for a particular type of manuscript. For example, clinical trials have a very specific format, as do manuscripts focused on quality improvement projects.

Authors sometimes struggle with creating something dynamic and so readers find passive, indirectly written statements that provide a focus on what the reader is about to read or what the reader just read. How to improve these two aspects of a manuscript could follow the formula used by the show, “Prairie Home Companion” (PHC; Keillor, 1974-2016). Although the PHC was an audio format and journals are not, the same strategy can apply. Further, no official formula existed, yet every PHC show followed the same format.

Here is how it worked:

PHC begins with some story. Let’s say it’s about a stray dog. The show progresses with its usual entertainment segments, some songs, some stories, some conversation. Then the end approaches, and we hear more about the stray dog. Applying that to a manuscript suggests that we tell readers something, then perform the usual routine (in our case, adhering to publication expectations). When we get to the conclusion, we need to pull the work together. Two options provide a strong close: go back to the title and use some of those words or return to the first paragraph to find the key message there, and repeat or paraphrase it in the conclusion.

Closure for a manuscript is as important as an opening is, and the closure needs to bring the reader to a satisfactory end. That end may be clarity of what a study did or did not tell us about something, direction for what we should do next to know more about a topic, or satisfaction that another author has reinforced a particular concept. From the beginning to the ending, readers value coming away with a sense that reading that particular article was worthwhile.

REFERENCE

Patricia S. Yoder-Wise, RN, EdD, NEA-BC, ANEF, FAAN
Editor-in-Chief
psywrn@aol.com

The author has disclosed no potential conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise.

doi:10.3928/00220124-20180613-01